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## DRAMATIC FASHIONS ILLUSTRATED IN SIX OLD PLAYS

From the end of the sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth there were written in England six plays, all dealing with the same story. The plays are, the anonymous *A Knacke to Knowe a Knave*, Edward Ravenscroft's *King Edgar and Alfreda*, Thomas Rymer's *Edgar; or, the English Monarch*, Aaron Hill's *Elfrid*, the same writer's *Athelwold*, and William Mason's *Elfrida*.<sup>1</sup> The story is the old legend of the love of King Edgar for the fair Alfreda or Elfrid. The plays are of little intrinsic merit, but the various changes in the treatment of the same theme well illustrate the varying dramatic fashions during two centuries. To the student of dramatic theory and practice in England the modifications introduced in these successive plays are full of significance, and a study of them from this point of view may well be worth while.

In examining these plays it is necessary to have in mind the process of change in the formulation and application of English dramatic theories from the mid-Elizabethan era, when detached neo-classical rules were preached but not much practiced, to the Restoration period, when a partial and superficial neo-classicism was combined with the heroic type; to the early eighteenth century development of the sentimental domestic tragedy; to the practically contemporaneous vogue of neo-classical plays following French models; and to the time later in the century when there arose a group of plays which hark back directly, without the mediation of interpreting rules, to Grecian models. All of these schools of dramatic composition are represented, or approximately represented, by the series of plays mentioned above. The Elizabethan comedy represents the relative formlessness of the popular drama of the time. Ravenscroft's is a heroic play in the straight-jacket of superficial neo-classicism. *Edgar*, as will be seen, stands apart as an example of the strict application of neo-classical rules. Hill's first play belongs distinctly to the sentimental group. His *Athelwold* shows the influence of the

<sup>1</sup> Ward, *English Dramatic Literature*, II, 610, note, mentions these plays, but no one, as far as I am aware, has attempted a comparison of them.

“regular” tragedies of French authorship. And Mason’s *Elfrida* is fairly typical of what may be termed the pseudo-Grecian method, in contradistinction to the neo-classic.

The story on which these plays are based is old. Ward<sup>2</sup> points out that it is found in an old “Song of King Edgar, shewing how he was deceived of his Love”.<sup>3</sup> He might have added that many of the old chronicles relate practically the same story.<sup>4</sup> It is worth summarizing here. The song relates that King Edgar,<sup>5</sup> a widower, having heard of the beauty of Estrild (Alfrid), daughter of Earl Orgstor of Devonshire, summoned a knight, Ethelwood, (Ethelwold, Athelwold) and sent him to see Estrild, and, if he found her beauty equalled report, to woo her for the king. The knight went to Devonshire, became himself enamoured of the maid, and planned to win her. So he returned to the king with the assurance that the girl’s beauty was far less than had been reported, and that she was

“.....far unmeet in everything  
To match with such a noble king.”

However, Ethelwood hinted that her riches would make her no bad match for himself. The king consented, and the knight wedded the lady. The king, after these events, continued to hear reports of Estrild’s beauty, and concluded that he had been deceived. Therefore, not betraying his wrath, he told Ethelwood to prepare for a royal visit. The knight, dismayed, confessed to his wife his wretched deceit, and begged her to disguise her beauty by homely attire and repulsive behavior. She seemed to assent to the request, but when the king came, greeted him in her costliest robes, and returned his glances with interest. The king, seeing her beauty, was angered. Calling to the earl, he suggested that they go hunting; and during the hunt “with a shaft the earl was slain.” And in time the king married the lady. The song concludes,

<sup>2</sup> Hist. Eng. Dram. Lit., II, 610, Note 2.

<sup>3</sup> Found in *Old Ballads*, Thos. Evans, 1777, Vol. I, p. 22; and in Publications of the Percy Society, Vol. XXX, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> Gerard Langbaine, *An Account of the English Dramatic Poets*, 1691 edition, p. 434, points out some, but not all, of these.

<sup>5</sup> The Saxon king, reigning A. D. 959-975.

“Thus he that did the king deceive  
 Did by desert his death receive.  
 Then, to conclude and make an end,  
 Be true and faithful to thy friend.”

This is substantially the story found in the chronicles. They add certain details about Edgar's reign which appear in some of the later plays. For example, Holinshed and Stow, not to mention the early chroniclers, such as Roger de Hoveden and Matthew of Westminster, tell how Edgar had eight captive kings row his barge on the river. Edgar's great navy is referred to by most of the chroniclers; Holinshed refrains from mentioning any definite number of ships; Speed, following Hoveden, puts it at 3600; Stow gives the same number, but thinks 300 the more likely; Matthew of Westminster makes it 4800. Rymer, in the prologue to his play, rates it at an even four thousand. Grafton and Holinshed relate the story of the quarrel between “Kynadus”, king of Scotland, and Edgar, and several authorities vouch for the presence of the Scottish king at the English court, an incident of which Rymer makes use. These details, and the love-story of Edgar, form the stuff out of which the plays were fashioned.

In *A Knacke to Knowe a Knaue*<sup>6</sup> the Edgar-Alfreda story is practically the same as in the old song, save in the catastrophe. Edgar sends Ethelwald as his proxy to woo Alfreda, and is deceived by his envoy, who marries the girl himself. The king visits the traitor, and is determined to kill him, when Dunstan, who in the play is related to Ethelwald, summons the devil, whereupon the king forgives the bishop's relative. The time element of the story is unmodified, and the various episodes are shown completely in action; the

<sup>6</sup> Dodsley's *Old English Plays*, Vol. VI. This play is not, of course, representative of the fully developed Elizabethan technique. It was printed in 1594. Henslowe (W. W. Greg. ed.) enters the play in June, 1592. Greg (II, 156) in comment says the play was performed as a new play June 10, 1592. The general crudity in design and dialog, especially the utter absence of connection between the “morality” portion of the play and the Edgar-Alfreda portion, save as both are connected with the king, seem to be indications of an early date of composition.

unities of time and place are broken with cheerful unconcern. There is not even unity of action in the play, for a wholly distinct set of incidents is introduced, dealing with the efforts of "Honesty" to reveal the knavery of the four sons of the "Bayliff of Hexam". These scenes and the Edgar-Alfreda scenes are jumbled confusedly, and on top of all there is added a farcical incident dealing with the mad men of "Goteham" and their petition to the king.

In dramatic technique the play is crude, and not representative of the best of its time. The writer, in the portion dealing with the Alfreda story, adheres closely to the original, and makes no attempt to adapt it to stage presentation. When he wants to add complexity to his plot, instead of increasing the intricacy of the main set of incidents he throws in a morality and a bit of farce. In these matters the play is decidedly below the standard of attainment in 1592. On the other hand, in its disregard of the neo-classical principles so strongly advocated by Elizabethan critics, it follows the general example of the plays of its time. For instance, it ignores the neo-classical insistence that there shall be no mingling of the serious and the comic in a play; here they alternate with great rapidity. Again, the rules of decorum forbid the inclusion of "low" characters in a serious play, but here king and clown rub elbows. The disregard of the unities has been noted. Theory and practice are widely separated during this era.

Ravenscroft's play <sup>7</sup> carries us forward almost a century.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> It has been pointed out by Ward (III, 28) and Schelling (II, 232) that Massinger's *Great Duke of Florence* (licensed 1627) is but a thinly disguised treatment of the Edgar-Alfreda theme, with the names of the characters changed and the scene transferred to Italy. This play would furnish an example of the development of Elizabethan technique, and the changes are significant of changing dramatic fashions. But to include Massinger's play in this discussion would pave the way for the inclusion of other plays on the same general theme of lovers' envoys (in narrative poetry *Miles Standish* would belong in this class) and would consume more space than would be profitable. Therefore it seems best to limit ourselves to the six plays on the actual English story.

<sup>8</sup> Ravenscroft's play appeared in 1677. But it is a revised version of an earlier play by the same author. In the prolog the author says,  
"This Play at least Ten Years ago was writt;

It was acted in 1677<sup>9</sup> and was printed the same year. It probably appeared toward the end of the year, for its first and only advertisement in the Term Catalogues appears on the 28th of February, 1678.<sup>10</sup>

The lapse of time has brought about a decided change in dramatic methods, and whereas we see the Elizabethan playwright adhering closely to the story in the old song, and gaining variety of interest at the expense of utter loss of unity of action, we find Ravenscroft manipulating his material and adapting it to his purpose, if not with skill, at least with boldness. It is true that the antecedent action which is indicated follows the first part of the Edgar-Alfreda story with considerable fidelity, but the catastrophe is changed, and new characters and new incidents are freely introduced. Says Ravenscroft in his Preface, "I have introduced new Persons to raise a Plott, and vary'd from the *Chronicle*, to better the Character of the King; Knowing that the Criticks in Poetry are more Censorious and Severe, than the Historians." This consciousness of critical standards, and this avowed effort to meet their demands, are significant of changes since the easy Elizabethan era.

Ravenscroft's play, like those coming after his, takes up the Edgar-Alfreda story at a point where it is already well advanced. The initial situation of the play shows departure from sources. Ethelwold does not remain at home, but is at court with his newly won Alfreda. Edgar, the king, is pro-

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A time when th' Author had more Zeal than Witt;  
But pondering on't he found it wou'd not do."

That is, an old play has been remodeled to suit the taste of the times. For example, in regard to rime, so distinctly characteristic of the heroic drama, Ravenscroft writes that the playgoers are surfeited; consequently he has changed much of the dialog into blank verse. Likewise he feels the need of reaction from the excess of the heroic drama; so,

"We have no Rant, no Rapture, nor high flight,

The Poet makes us Men and Women all to Night."

For all this, there *is* rant and exaggeration. But it is evident that the play was first written to conform to the heroic method, and was rewritten to agree with new standards, involving some of the dicta of neo-classicism.

<sup>9</sup> Genest, *An Account of the English Stage*, Vol. I, p. 201; Theatre Royal, 1677.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Arber's Reprints of Term Catalogues, date cited.

vided with a queen, the daughter of a lord Ruthin, through whose machinations she has attained her position. For a time events move along as in the old story. Ethelwold reveals his treachery to Alfreda, who agrees to do her best to rescue him from his predicament. But, angered, she exerts herself to attract the king, who, noting her beauty, is furious at Ethelwold's deception. After various complications Alfreda and the king agree to meet that night. But Alfreda, who does not wish to go too far, warns the queen, who takes her place. Ethelwold, learning of the appointment but not of the substitution, plans to enter the bower and kill his guilty wife. He kills the queen, is himself killed, and the king is left free to marry Alfreda.<sup>11</sup>

In addition to the main plot minor episodes are introduced by means of new characters. Edgar is provided with a sister, Matilda, and Alfreda with a brother, Aldernald, a young admiral, who comes to court accompanied by Durzo, "a blunt Sea Captain." Aldernald is paired off with Matilda, while

<sup>11</sup> It is worthy of note that Ravenscroft and Rymer both depart from the chronicles to adopt virtually the same catastrophe. The practically simultaneous appearance of the two plays makes borrowing either way improbable, unless Rymer got hold of that early version which Ravenscroft speaks of, and this appears unlikely. A common source seems probable.

Ravenscroft in his Preface remarks "Several Forreign Authors have writ upon this part [i. e., the Edgar-Alfreda part] of the Story; some have disguis'd it under borrow'd Names, but all of 'em were at a loss when they came towards a conclusion, and have left it imperfect, fearing to blemish the Character of the King: I found it difficult, but hope I have succeeded so well as to make the last Act the best, and the Catastrophe in that point not blameable; the Husband receives his death from another hand, whence it appears just, yet accidental." This would seem to imply that Ravenscroft invented the catastrophe; but the word of a Restoration dramatist can never be taken as final on that score, and Rymer in his preface seems to point to an old source: "I must appeal from the late Epitomizers, who make Edgar point-blank guilty of Ethelwold's Death, without any sufficient ground from Antiquity." This last clause is puzzling. Had Rymer forgotten the old chronicles? However this may be, Rymer claims authority for *his* version, in "the Histories". Langbaine (1691 ed.) refers to "The Annals of Love" (no author stated), and "Ubalдино, Le Vite delle Donne Illustri" for sources, and these might throw some light on the matter; but they are not accessible to me.

Durzo falls in love with Hillaria, a lady of the court. Thus there are two minor strands of love-plottings, only slightly connected with the main plot by the blood-relationship of the characters. Complication is still gained somewhat at the expense of unity, but not by the introduction of such utterly foreign material as the Elizabethan playwright felt free to use.

The unities of time and place are strictly observed. The action all takes place at the court, and consumes one day. Some attention is paid to the principle of decorum—in regard to the characters which are suitable to tragedy, and to the qualities and traits these characters ought to manifest. That this was conscious is evinced in the portion of the Preface already quoted, in which Ravenscroft states that he has bettered the character of the king, to conform to critical standards. In general the participants in the action are of that rank which decorum insists must grace personages in tragedy; but the vulgar and rough Durzo would be condemned by the strict neo-classicist in one word: low. Moreover, another neo-classical canon is violated when because of the nature of the scenes in which Durzo takes part comedy is introduced into the tragedy. Finally, bloodshed and murder are permitted to occur on the stage, and the queen and Ethelwold die in the presence of the audience.

In a word, Ravenscroft's play shows an advance in technique over its Elizabethan forerunner; but on the other hand it is still considerably removed from those standards, some of which English dramatic critics had been setting up for a hundred years. There has been progress toward "regularity", especially in regard to the unities; but not complete attainment of it, even in externals. And in spirit the play is far from neo-classical, as will be seen when it is compared with Rymer's play. Yet in all this, *Edgar and Alfreda* is typical of its time.

When we turn to Rymer's *Edgar*<sup>12</sup> we come to a play distinctly not typical, but interesting as an illustration of what

<sup>12</sup> *Edgar* was licensed Sept. 13, 1677. The title page bears the date 1678. It was advertised in the Term Catalogues on November 26, 1677, so that it must have been ready for the public soon after that time. That is, it appeared about the same time as Ravenscroft's play. There is no evidence to show that Rymer's play was ever acted.



the English drama might have become had it ever yielded complete and thorough allegiance to the neo-classical rules. For in this play Rymer, a critic whole-heartedly supporting a most rigid Aristotelian formalism, applies his rules to creative work.

The plot, as in the case of Ravenscroft's, although based on the familiar story, departs from it in details, in order to gain unity of time and place, and intricacy of action. The scene is again placed at Edgar's court, to which Ethelwold has just brought his bride, Alfreda, or Alfrid, as Rymer calls her. In essentials the main plot, developed by original episodes, carries out the chronicle story, save in the *dénouement*, in which, much as in Ravenscroft's play, the queen is substituted for Alfrid in the bower, and Alfrid and Edgar are left free to marry.

Complication is gained by introducing new characters and new and sometimes irrelevant episodes. The love affairs of Edgar's sister and the deposed and disguised Lewis IV of France, and of the princess Gunilda of Denmark and Kenneth, the captive king of Scotland, their mutual jealousies and final happiness, form a sub-plot which, as in the preceding play, is practically unrelated to the main story. In addition to the situations thus furnished Rymer has included a masque, in which Neptune lays his trident at Edgar's feet, and a gorgeous scene in which the eight captive kings row the royal barge.

The modifications and changes which Rymer has introduced are significant of his dramatic standards. For example, Alfrid is made more obedient and devoted than she appears in the chronicles, presumably to the end that the successful outcome of her affairs may be deserved, and poetic justice safeguarded. The writer is mindful of the dictum that tragedy shall deal only with the affairs of illustrious personages, and the new characters are all of gentle birth and manners—no Durzo stains the pages of *Edgar*. The standard of probability, which Rymer so sternly preached, he has not forgotten in his treatment of the sub-plot. His pairs of lovers have already met, and it is not surprising that they finally come to

terms during the ten hours of the play; whereas Ravenscroft's lovers meet and woo and agree to marry all within one short day. Finally, in the choice of a subject for a masque, Rymer, following his announced theories, is emphasizing patriotic ideas, in contradistinction to the bombastic mouthings of vaguely oriental potentates in the still popular heroic drama.

Rymer's rigid standards are apparent not only in his treatment of the sub-plot and new material, but also in his management of the play as a whole. The unities of time and place are strictly observed; the place is Edgar's court, and at the beginning of the play it is announced that "the time of the Representation [is] from Twelve at Noon to Ten at Night." On the other hand, unity of action, a principle rather slighted by neo-classical critics in their zeal for the other unities, is likewise slighted in this play. The principle of decorum, translated into the rules of court etiquette, is carefully followed. The illustrious characters, in their relations with each other, have the utmost regard for place and precedent.<sup>13</sup> Due heed is paid to the demands of poetic justice. Ethelwold's sins are visited upon his own head during the very progress of the play, and "nothing left to God Almighty and another World."<sup>14</sup>

Measured by the rules, the play is weakest on the score of probability. In spite of the previously noted indication of Rymer's attention to this standard, he has sometimes neglected it. For example, it seems improbable that within the ten hours of the play's duration news should be received, first that Scotland has rebelled, and secondly that the people have resumed their loyalty. Of course, this might be accounted for on the ground that the first message has been delayed; but it is not thus explained away in the play. Again, Ethelwold's action in bringing his wife to court, when he is highly

<sup>13</sup> Professor Lounsbury (in *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist*, p. 241) has pointed out that Rymer sins against his own precepts by permitting a woman to kill a man, though it is done decorously behind the scenes. But if Rymer's rule be consulted, it will be found to read that no woman is to "kill a man, except her quality gives her the advantage above him" (*Tragedies of the Last Age*, p. 117); and the woman who kills the man is the queen.

<sup>14</sup> *Tragedies of the Last Age*, p. 26.

interested in keeping her from the king's view, is, as Genest has pointed out<sup>15</sup>, highly improbable. To be sure, Ravenscroft is guilty of a similar lapse, but he had not preached the doctrine of probability as Rymer had. In this respect, then, Rymer nods at times—although not always.

In general, however, the play is exceedingly "regular". The difference in spirit between a thoroughly neo-classical play and one possessing merely a few of the external characteristics of regularity will be apparent if Rymer's play be compared with Ravenscroft's. The emphasis in the one is quite unlike the emphasis in the other. In *Edgar* the love element is subordinated as much as possible to the tragic aspect of the story. Not the sentiment of love so much as the accompanying misunderstandings receive attention, in plot and in sub-plot alike. As much as possible "all the soft things, all the amours, the flowers and fleurets", to quote from Rymer's criticism, are banished. Furthermore, every possible opportunity is taken to emphasize the features of Edgar's reign which appeal to the patriotic feelings,<sup>16</sup> instead of leaving the love motif in unrelieved prominence. The patriotic element is entirely lacking in Ravenscroft's play, and the love, which is frankly emphasized, is for the most part either open or veiled sensual passion. One significant detail may be instanced which corroborates this view. In *Edgar* there is no scene in which the king makes his appointment with Alfrid to meet in the bower; in *King Edgar and Alfreda* the appointment is made in one scene and ratified in a second with marked emphasis. Rymer is consciously avoiding "gallantries". Ravenscroft is following the Fletcherian and Restoration tradition, which revels in such "gallantries". Rymer follows the neo-classic idea of restraint and austerity to the point of frigidity; Ravenscroft enjoys excess. The difference between Rymer's play and Ravenscroft's shows the difference between a play almost wholly in harmony with the rules, and one which superficially meets some of their requirements, but

<sup>15</sup> Vol. I, p. 223 ff.

<sup>16</sup> In the "Advertisement" inserted before the play, Rymer states definitely that he has "chiefly sought occasions to extoll the English Monarchy." His choice of title: *Edgar; or, the English Monarch*, was not haphazard.

really is only in part "regular." The comparison illustrates the difference between the so-called "regularity" of the plays of the seventies, and genuine compliance with the demands of Aristotelian formalism.

Aaron Hill's *Elfrid* brings us to 1710. The very title is an indication of a change in emphasis. The full title is *Elfrid: or, the Fair Inconstant*. That is, Elfrid is the central personage. With Rymer, Edgar had been the chief character. With Ravenscroft, Edgar and Alfreda divided attention. With Rymer, patriotic fervor is implied in the sub-title, *The English Monarch*. With Hill the attention is focused upon the love-theme.

In the plot of Hill's play there is a tendency to revert to the original story as found in the old song and in the chronicles. In these the catastrophe occurs at Ethelwold's home and nearby; so in *Elfrid* the scene is not at the royal court but at "Athelwold's House." Edgar's wife, with whom he had been furnished by Ravenscroft and Rymer, disappears. Elfrid is portrayed, not as submissive and loving, but as ambitious, and rebellious to her husband's plans of concealing her beauty from the king. Besides these reversions to the old story, Hill has introduced other changes. Athelwold is furnished with a friend, Ordgar; Elfrid with a sister, Ordelia. The love affairs of Ordgar and Ordelia form the sub-plot. Accompanying the king is Egbert, the villain, who aids the king in attaining his desires in regard to Elfrid because her husband, Athelwold, is a rival in the royal favor, and a rival whom Egbert actively desires to humble and remove.

The plot is simple. Besides the minor theme of the loves of Ordgar and Ordelia, there is the main story of the king's arrival; the attempt to pass Ordelia upon him as Elfrid, because Ordelia is less temptingly beautiful; the treachery of Elfrid in revealing herself to the king; the plotting of Egbert whereby the king sends Athelwold away upon royal business, so that Elfrid may be obtained; Ordgar's discovery of Egbert's complicity, and his murder of the villain; the return of the suspicious Athelwold in time to discover his wife's guilt; his murder of Elfrid; the king's murder of Athelwold, and his immediate repentance.

In this plot it is seen that poetic justice in the neo-classical sense of the term is swift. Egbert, the villain, is killed. The king, misled by Egbert, repents. Elfrid, who is here guilty, is killed. Athelwold, who was guilty of the original deceit, likewise atones for his treachery with his life. And he dies most piously, crying,

“Oh! Ordgar, let my sad example teach thee

Not to make Love thy Plea for Guilt!”

and calling upon his friend with his last breath,

“Farewell! and—if Orelia shall be thine,

Bid her—remember Elfrid—Elfrid—oh!”

He is bound that, since he has to die, others shall profit from his death and from a study of the causes leading up to it. One rather regrets that his last thought is of Elfrid's sins and not of his own. However, although one may ridicule the manner of accomplishing the end, there can be no doubt but that Hill had the distinct purpose of emphasizing the moral lesson. The purpose is one of which Rymer would have distinctly approved; the emotional excess with which it is accomplished is hardly Rymerian.

In regard to the unities, the play is absolutely impeccable. The scene is in Athelwold's house and in the garden beside it. The time is proudly announced in the Preface to be “no more than the Play requires in its Representation”. And the action is “one and entire”. The comic is as strictly barred as in *Edgar* itself. Decorum is observed in the treatment of the king. Athelwold draws his sword against the royal person, but Elfrid opportunely saves him from any such breach of decorum as would be involved in thrusting at Majesty, by entering and thus transferring her husband's resentment to herself, so that he kills her instead of his royal master. To be sure, this is in turn a breach of the rule that a man must not draw his sword against a woman; but inasmuch as Athelwold is here acting as an agent of poetic justice, his action is excused by the more potent law. The violation of the rule prohibiting bloodshed on the stage is, however, open and inexcusable. Three murders are committed before the very eyes of the audience. In short, the play is externally “regular” save as it errs, where English plays so often err, in permitting scenes of violence on the stage.

But it is in the treatment of the love theme that Hill differs from both Ravenscroft and Rymer, and departs most widely from the demands of Aristotelian formalism. Love, in Hill's play, is not the external, impossibly exalted love of the heroic drama; it is not the Fletcherian passion exemplified to some degree in Ravenscroft's play; it is not the restrained and subordinated love of *Edgar*; it is a transport of emotion. Love is the very centre of the play. Ravenscroft had relieved the central love theme by lighter treatment of it in the sub-plot. Rymer had subordinated it to patriotism. Hill banishes everything which will overshadow it, and leaves it in unrelieved prominence. In the very opening scene Athelwold enlarges upon his love for Elfrid; when the news of the king's coming is brought, and the guilty husband reveals the deceit of which Elfrid was the victim, love is the excuse:

"Oh! think on all the Arts, that Love can use,  
To gain the Object Lov'd!"<sup>17</sup>

Ordella constantly preaches the power of love, in palliating Athelwold's crime. The king, when he learns of Athelwold's guilt, cries,

"O Love! thy Power is uncontroul'd indeed,  
If it can make an honest Man a Villain."<sup>18</sup>

Near the close of the play Athelwold laments,

"I had been honest, had not Love seduc'd me!"<sup>19</sup>

And the king concludes the play with the lines,

"And oh! may this Example serve to prove,  
He treads on dang'rous Ground, who walks on Love."

And this love which dominates the play is in some of the characters sensual, in some idealistic, in some marital, but always serious, passionate, and emotional. Hill's course in locating the action not at the royal court but at Athelwold's home is significant. The outward position of the characters does not interest him; their inner feelings are to form the subject of his play. The emphasis is upon the emotional throughout, and one can imagine the audience weeping in sentimental sympathy as Ordgar weeps over his dying friend.

<sup>17</sup> *Elfrid*, 1710 edition, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> *Elfrid*, p. 23.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

The play is typical of the change in dramatic fashions since the time of Ravenscroft. The neo-classical rules seemingly triumphed; in externals Hill's play is almost as "regular" as Rymer's own. But side by side with the tendency to admit the validity of the rules, there grew up an interest in the sentimental, the emotional, which affected much of English literature, and which so influenced the drama that plays superficially "regular" were in essence as much opposed to the neo-classic ideas of restraint and rule as could well be imagined. At the time when *Elfrid* appeared this sentimentalist influence was particularly noticeable in comedy, but it made itself felt in tragedy, too, culminating twenty years later in the domestic tragedy of Lillo. The peculiar significance of *Elfrid* lies in the distinct trend it shows toward this developing domestic tragedy. The characters are not, indeed, middle-class citizens, but their rank is of superficial import; and the background of domestic life, and the plot with its emotional stress and melodramatic excess, smack decidedly of the typical domestic tragedy.

It is all the more interesting, therefore, to see Hill, two decades later, at a time when domestic tragedy was culminating in *George Barnwell*, realign himself with a different school of dramatists. This he did in his *Athelwold* (1731).

Although *Athelwold* deals with the same material as *Elfrid*, it is not a revision of that play, but in reality a new one. The main theme is the same, but the point of view is changed, the scene is different, the characters, save for the three chief ones, are new, the incidents are new, and the whole effect is different.

The changed point of view is significant. Not the domestic aspect of love, but love in regal trappings, is what Hill now strives to portray. The scene is not a secluded residence, but the royal abode at Chester. Curiously enough, the episode of the eight rower-kings, used by Rymer, is here once more employed to aid in the impression of splendor and power that the royal presence should give.

This would seem to indicate a reversion to those neo-classical ideas which Rymer had voiced in his criticism and had followed in his play. Indeed *Athelwold* is fairly representative

of the neo-classical plays of its own time. But in it neo-classicism is not so all-pervading as in *Edgar*, and, though more effective than in *Elfrid*, is still modified by traces of sentimentalism. Furthermore, this neo-classicism is to be attributed not so much to the influence of past English criticism as to the great vogue in England of contemporary French drama. *Athelwold* belongs to a rather numerous group of English plays of the time formed after French models.

This French influence seems especially clear in the case of Hill, who was himself a translator or adapter of some of Voltaire's plays. Thus, after having early flirted with the developing domestic tragedy in his *Elfrid*, Hill turned to French models and wrote *Athelwold* at the very time when domestic tragedy was to attain its most noteworthy development.

Hill's preface contains hints of his attitude. He refers slightly to his early play as "an unprun'd Wilderness of Fancy," lacking judgment. He mentions respectfully the rules; but evidently they are not all-sufficient. Under their sway, "mysterious Dullness, and the dry Pride of Commentators" have injured the drama. This is not quite equivalent to Rymer's sublime faith in his rules. Knowing Hill's experience with French plays, one suspects that he regards example as rather more weighty than precept.

Of course, many of the rules are followed, just as they are in the French models. The characters are all royal or illustrious. Due regard is paid to decorum, that is, to court etiquette. *Athelwold* will not for a moment draw his sword against his royal master. The unities of time and place are observed, though not so much stressed as in the earlier play. And, especially significant, there is no bloodshed on the stage. French example here accomplishes what English precept has failed to effect.

But Hill, though following neo-classical models, does not entirely escape from his earlier habit of sentimentality. Undue and unmotivated emotionalism manifests itself at times. *Athelwold* wavers between mistresses in an impossible but sentimental manner. Ethelinda, whom *Athelwold* has deceived and deserted, makes repeated and mawkish advances toward reconciliation, in a way to rejoice all lovers of tears.



Edgar, originally a monarch of force and decision, betrays a quick sensitiveness and a delicacy that hint of the eighteenth century "man of feeling".

In a word, the play, while in externals it conforms to French neo-classical models, and while it is a departure from the tendency toward the domestic tragedy shown in *Elfrid*, falls short of the Rymerian standard of genuine "regularity".

As an example of Hill's growth in the management of dramatic material, *Athelwold* is enlightening. Hill evidently desired greater complexity than he had given *Elfrid*; but he had sufficiently mastered technique not to seek this complexity through adding a distinct group of unrelated characters and incidents, as his forerunners had done, but rather through introducing two or three new characters and then binding closely their fortunes with those of the main characters. The main story is of course the usual one of Athelwold's deception of Edgar and marriage of Elfrid. But there are added to these characters Leolyn, who is a deposed prince of Wales, Oswald, a minister of state, and Ethelinda, Oswald's niece. And their fortunes are bound up with those of the chief characters. Under promise of marriage Ethelinda has yielded to the solicitations of Athelwold, and her despair on learning of his marriage to Elfrid materially affects the outcome of the play. Leolyn loves Ethelinda, and his hot resentment against Athelwold involves him in the main action. And Oswald, already jealous of Athelwold, is brought into the main stream of events by the measures he naturally takes upon learning of his niece's wrongs. In managing the additional complication and in binding the various episodes firmly to the main story Hill shows distinct ability. The example of the French drama may be responsible for his increased deftness of workmanship; although it cannot be said that this French deftness was widely copied in England.

However, although in plot coherence *Athelwold* cannot be considered thoroughly typical, it does offer in its pale reflection of neo-classicism and in its traces of sentimentality an example of the group of English plays of its era which owe their inspiration and much of their form to the contemporary drama of the French neo-classicists.

A number of mid-eighteenth century plays hark back not to French but to Greek models. Of these Mason's *Elfrida* is a somewhat extreme representative. Not originally written for the stage,<sup>20</sup> it follows some of the conventions of the Greek drama to a degree rather beyond that possible to other more practical playwrights whose work belongs in this group. Yet it will serve to illustrate the tendencies of its companion plays, which themselves were less thoroughly adapted to stage presentation than even the poorer plays of England's great dramatic period.

Forming a preface are five "Letters" dated "Pembroke Hall, 1751", which analyze and defend the distinguishing features of the play. They throw light upon Mason's standards and aims. He announces that he will follow Greek models. But he is not seeking "to give an exact copy of the ancient drama". He will only "pursue the ancient method so far as it is probable a Greek Poet, were he alive, would now do"—which leaves considerable room for variation from classical models. The unities are prescribed by "good sense" as well as by antiquity, hence they are observed. But to meet the demand of the times, ancient precepts are ignored in the choice of a theme, and "a story was chosen, in which the tender, rather than the noble passions were predominant, and in which even love had the principal share". Again a certain deviation is noted: the characters "as nearly approach private ones, as tragic dignity would permit". The emotions are to be aroused "rather from the impulse of common humanity, than the distresses of royalty and the fate of kingdoms". That is, Mason is consciously deviating from his chosen models and he defends his deviations on the plea that modern conditions demand them. It is to be noted that the changes are in the direction of the practices of domestic tragedy, which was still influential in English drama. The third and fourth letters defend the introduction of the chorus in the usual way: it is conducive to the

<sup>20</sup> It first appeared in print in 1752. It was altered for the stage by Colman in 1772, and by Mason himself in 1779. The original version is the one used here. The others offer no essential variations. In them some flowery passages are missing, and the play is divided into five acts. However, the songs of the chorus afford sufficient indication of division in the 1752 version.

preservation of the unities and affords opportunity for conveying moral reflections. The other letters discuss various neo-classical doctrines of less significance. To sum up: the important features of the introductory letters are, on the one hand the announcement that Greek models are to be followed, and in particular that the Greek idea of the chorus is to be introduced; and on the other hand the intimation that the author is to depart from classical precedent by using romantic love as a main theme, and by portraying the private life rather than the public activities of his characters. From all this one is led to expect that Mason's play will conform neither to Greek practice nor to rigid neo-classical precept. So far as Greek models are to have any influence at all, they will affect form rather than spirit.

The play fulfills these expectations. The chorus is ever present, and plays its part, somewhat incongruously, it must be noted, in so English a story. But through it Mason gains what he desired to gain: "poetic" ornamentation, and a clear presentation of the moral to be drawn from the various events of the plot.

Furthermore, the play is rigidly simple. The characters are few in number. The old story is followed more closely than in any of the preceding plays, and there is absolutely no sub-plot. Even the earliest play of the group dealing with the Edgar story had sought some relief from the simplicity of the main plot, and the rest of the plays had gained complexity through the introduction of new characters and new interests, but Mason discards all such measures, and presents the main events without any accessories, comic or serious. The story as found in the old song is followed save in two not very important respects: Elfrida's father is the means of uncovering Athelwold's guilt to the king, Elfrida being an unwilling instrument; and at the very end, Elfrida gives no hope that she will eventually marry the king. The changes both result in making Elfrida a more sympathetic character—a result which it was desirable to attain, since around her the tragedy was built. Simplicity, and the employment of the chorus; these characteristics, and the accompanying introduction of somewhat conventional "odes", show what Mason

meant by following Greek models. They distinguish the play from its predecessors.

In addition, it possesses certain neo-classical characteristics already familiar. The comic is barred. No murder is committed on the stage. The unities are strictly observed. Decorum in the sense of etiquette is never forgotten. Poetic justice is wrought, and is driven home by the chorus. In one of the choral odes it is proclaimed that heavenly defense will be lacking "if guilt, if fraud, has stained your mind".<sup>21</sup> Then Athelwold, the perpetrator of the fraud, is killed, and "Semi-chorus" sings,<sup>22</sup>

"As Truth directs  
So only shall we act. This day has shewn  
What dire effects await its violation."

And Elfrida's father, Orgar, also in accordance with the demands of poetic justice, is successful as long as he seeks to frustrate Athelwold's villainy, but frustrated in turn when he would give play to his own ambition and make his daughter a queen against the demands of propriety.

These features are neo-classic. On the other hand, there are present, as the introduction has led us to expect, elements of still a different nature. The characters in the main are shown, not in their royal or noble capacity, but as human beings. The emotions stressed are intimate and personal. As in Hill's first play, the fact that the scene is not at the royal court but at Athelwold's home is significant of the different emphasis. Patriotism is incidental. The emphasis is upon the private and the personal. The fact that love designedly forms the main theme of the play is a second characteristic which may be regarded as a concession to the dramatic tastes of the time. But the emotionalism of love is not so exaggerated as it was in Hill's first play. There is not so much soft sentiment. The ideals of domestic tragedy, while still powerful enough to influence this professed follower of Greek models, have somewhat lost their first force.

Mason's play, then, seems influenced in form by its Greek models; it possesses many of the conventional neo-classical

<sup>21</sup> 1752 ed., p. 50.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76.

characteristics; and it also shows distinct traces of the impress of domestic tragedy. And in all this it is not untypical of its group.

In the series of plays we have now considered neo-classicism has played an important part. Yet, although there has been much that is neo-classical in form, there has been little really classical in essence. The triumph of neo-classicism has been barren, and the way is clear for the operation of new forces. From 1590 to 1750 there has been a growth in technique, a growth in the sense of form, an increase in "regularity"; but a loss in spontaneity, and a loss in the power to win an audience. *A Knacke to Know a Knave* must have appealed to its audience; *Elfrida* left its beholders cold.

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